



"Slippery, isn't it?" said Joe, "but mighty pretty"

# The Ice Storm

*A story of cold weather and warm hearts*

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ILLUSTRATED BY DENMAN FINK

ALL night the March rain had frozen where it fell so that the world blazed under the morning sun like a jeweler's window or a glass blower's exhibition piece, lovely and useless. Twigs so thick with ice that the birds had nowhere to perch; seeds and berries encrusted, too, like flies in amber, so that they had nothing to eat, and there was nothing for it but to die and become flies in amber too. Most of them did.

Walls of houses, roads, drifts of snow were glazed with pearl and opal fineness. The very young school teacher, looking out at the glittering slipperiness, was almost tearfully glad it was Saturday so that she wouldn't have to walk a mile to school with forty composition books under her arm. Of course one must work on Saturday, too; but one sat down.

On this Saturday there were examination papers from the Academic Department. Althea wouldn't have minded except that she didn't see how she was to finish everything before night. The Reverend Paul B. Cooper was to lecture to-night, and she must, now that she was engaged to him, she really must go to that.

If only her room would stay warm! But even as she took the stopper from her red ink bottle and spread out the papers, the radiator gave a warning click of receding heat. Tears of irritation sprang to her eyes. She had asked so very many times to have her room warm on Saturdays. Oh, well! She looked up at the photograph of the tropical island where Paul was going to take her. There, at least, one wouldn't have to worry about cold radiators.

With the red ink drying on her pen and her chin in her palm she regarded the picture long and curiously, then laid down the pen and went to the closet for a shawl. But instead of resuming work she brought the photograph and a reading glass back to her chair with her, and putting her feet against the fast cooling radiator wandered into that strange future of palms and coral and black faces—with the Reverend Paul B. Cooper at the center of things.

It showed a group of fifty black faces behind two white ones. And in the landscape no hint of grass, but hot-looking plants and the tousled heads of palms.

The white faces were those of a man and a woman: Paul's sharp and strong—low forehead, big nose, thin, flexible mouth. People had to come when he said "Come." How the townspeople had crowded to hear him this winter! No wonder the black folks of his island had yielded to him at once. (Or, almost at once. He limped sadly from a spear wound received before they began to love him.)

And when, with quiet suddenness, like a swooping hawk, he had asked Althea to marry him and go back to his island with him, she had acquiesced with radiant obedience. If it hadn't been for the face of the first Mrs. Cooper.

Paul had spoken of her once, and his eyes were wet. Althea did not like to ask. But under the reading glass the face stood out haggardly. Was it only the strong sunlight that gave the eyes a frightened look? But, so thin—and so careless of her dress! Yet perhaps she had never been strong. Althea passed the reading glass over the black faces one by one. Fancy trying to teach that chieftain—the fat one with the most bracelets and necklace! It was his spear, she under-

stood, that had caused Paul's limp; but he had repented, and Paul, in his exalted way, had said that the wound had been a small price to pay for a man's soul.

Had Mrs. Cooper felt that way about it, too? wondered Althea.

The last heat faded from the radiator.

From her window she could see, its ice-capped roof shining like fire in the morning sun, the house where she had been a little girl, centuries ago—five years in fact. It was empty now and before long would be torn down. She regretfully remembered the wood stove that had been in her room there. How comfortable had been its round red eye! How cozy the snapping and roaring inside—and the oven where a pitcher of water could be kept hot. And when the draft was right you could open the whole front door, which made it every bit as good as a fireplace to look into, and dream, and roast apples. But she did not remember among the dreams that she had followed among the coals ever to have seen the eager face of the Reverend Paul B. Cooper, or the white shore and the tousled palms, and the blunt-featured faces of a tropical island. Nor had she seen mountains of exercise books and examination papers, and cold radiators and unpleasant landladies.

How can mothers and fathers go away? Friends might; but these—so dear and alive! There must be some mistake about death. Remembering their kisses and warm laughter, you are sure there's some mistake.

At tea time, though the academic examination papers were meticulously dotted with red ink corrections throughout and neatly returned to their rubberbands, the composition books still towered; but Althea fortified herself with a cup of cold coffee to be taken against the midnight hours and a grudging promise from Mrs. Adams that her room should be warm.

Then, dressing with all the care her small wardrobe afforded, she set out over the undulating ice for the church, holding to slippery fences and slippery tree trunks, thrilling with pride to see how many other people were doing the same.

For the missionary, having begun modestly with accounts of his island, had somehow turned his lectures into sermons and started forthwith a notable revival, visiting upon white men the same stinging fire which had frightened and tamed black ones. And then the exhilaration of having all that he said understood and the feeling that his time was short, that when it was over he might never again look into listening white faces—all had fanned his words into flame, so that crowds followed him, as crowds always will when one speaks in that manner of hidden things, and all the clergymen roundabout were eagerly offering him their pulpits.

He told them frankly that sin, to him, meant a thing worse than anything their hearts could conceive.

Althea was sitting near the front because Paul had asked her to; otherwise she would have shrunk into a far corner or behind a pillar. Now as he stopped and looked down into her vivid young face some memory—or was it misgiving?—made him drop his head. She was so pale! And he had another face, and the brightness flashed over him again. Yet before he resumed his speech, his eyes repeated the words he had once quoted to her, apologizing for making use of a poem so unchristian:

—And Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise now!

After this pause he went on: "But I will not distress you further with the unspeakable sins of your brothers,"—and turned the pages of the Bible thoughtfully for a space. When he raised his head once more he had found his text:

"How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!"

He had an amazing voice, a high-pitched trumpet tone that carried to every corner like that of a grand opera tenor. And with this voice he painted a dead world wheeling around a cooling sun. The race of men was gone. There were no more opportunities, ever any more, for good or evil doing. Among disintegrating ruins were traces of windows like a skull's eye sockets. The sun rose and set too dim for any heat to melt the eternal snow.

And to the townspeople, listening with tears, it was their own village desolate among its hills, their own chimneys fallen, even their tombstones crumbled, illegible, no more than other stones on the hill-side.

"How doth the city sit solitary?"

So it followed, said Paul, that it was necessary to build an imperishable city elsewhere, moreover to be about it quickly, for time and opportunity were slipping through our fingers like dry sea sand and could never be gathered up any more, forever.

Althea's troubled eyes sought him appealingly across the shoulders of his other listeners, but he was borne along now by an artist's joy in words and did not see, so Althea's thoughts returned to the frightened, sick face of the woman who now lay so far away under the palms. Yet, if one thought in Paul's way, she should be occupying that mansion of imperishable material which she had built out of her many good deeds, so how could she come between Althea and Paul there in the squalid air of the church—her cheek near Paul's as in the photograph, while behind them rose the black cloud of cruel, stupid faces, melancholy palms, the desolate whiteness of the coral? Was it the "tortured men in the highways" that had made her eyes so sad?

Althea went out slowly after the lecture, hoping that Paul would come to her, but a backward glance showed him the center of many eager people. That was as it should be, thought Althea, sighing. Yet she would have liked to hear him talk about the beauty of the ice under the moonlight, and to have heard him say again: "Oh, Wilderness were Paradise now!" to take away the chill of the "solitary city" and that nightmare of coral and palms.

Paul had such a glowing way with him! If his wooing had been, well—somewhat remote and spiritual, a plea chiefly for his own need upon his lonely island, a brilliant setting forth of the good she could accomplish there with him, Althea had never been wooed before and was not critical. Her attitude was that of the beggar maid toward Copethua, or of a schoolgirl toward a popular matinee idol; and this, if not love, is at least a kind of amazing glamour easily mistaken for it.

It had seemed a gorgeous prospect when the spell of his language was new. One felt that one's enthusiasm would never fail; one felt gigantic, the instrument of an enormous benevolent Power which at last, oh, at last! after centuries of forgetful centuries, would make the world clean, even in its remotest parts. If she had never taken to studying that picture with the reading glass—but now, through the glass she and that other face had stared into each other's eyes until something had happened; some knowledge of women had been silently communicated to the girl.

The full moon was up, experimenting with ice effects. The trees shone and the houses gleamed. Althea went up the hill slowly, holding to fences where she could. It was amazingly cold. She shivered and wished that after all she had worn her old moth-eaten fur cape, which she had abandoned for pride's sake. She had wanted to look trim and pretty, and, after all, what difference did it make? But for that one meeting of his bright eyes while he was speaking she might have thought he had forgotten her. Still, if a man is forty and limps from the scars of savage battles, he would hardly care to escort a young girl over such an icy path.

Someone who did not limp, however, was coming behind her now, whistling out of tune. Could it be Joe Mack? Big Joe, still pottering along at the high school though as old as herself. But, then, she had been one of those precocious little creatures who fin-

Was that—could it be a light in her mother's window?



Althea sat with her in the firelight, putting her clothes in order, arranging her dusty old wig

ish at sixteen. It was because she had been so very brilliant that they had graciously allowed her to begin teaching the very next fall as an assistant, and she had put up her hair then and lengthened her skirts, swaggering like a young Roman in his first *toga virilis*. And now she was in the second year of her teaching, and the hair and long petticoats were an old, old story. As for Joe, he was always slow and behind—in spite of a clever mother—but for a rather extraordinary trick of picture-making. She had heard that he really must be an artist now. Odd to think of Joe Mack ever turning out to be anything but a boy! She remembered, though, that when they had played in each other's back yards he had had a nice way with him, and was good to his mother. She wondered if Joe knew when the old house was to be torn down, and turned to look at its dark bulk gleaming with ice under the moon, and stumbled; but Joe's hand caught her elbow before she could fall.

"Slippery, isn't it?" said Joe; "but mighty pretty." Then he went on disgustedly: "What makes you go round such a night as this without that fur cape you've been wearing all winter, and with a cough? D'you know what my mother'd do to you? She'd make you something awful of flaxseed—sticky and sweet—and put you to bed."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Althea, but the vision of Mrs. Mack with flaxseed and comfortable scoldings instead of a cold radiator and a pile of exercise books was most alluring.

"**D**YOU keep warm over at Adamses?" went on Joe. "They say the old lady has cornered the cold storage egg market."

"Oh, not so bad as that," said Althea. "We don't have eggs at all just now, they're so high."

"Codfish gravy, then, I'll bet. They say she uses the same coffee grounds all winter. Is that straight?"

Althea laughed. It was pleasant, after all, to be walking home with Joe, though Paul would have been instructive, and perhaps poetical. . . .

"I say," said Joe, "they're going to begin on your old house Monday, tearing out the inside. We had some bully old times there, didn't we? Remember the time we got up on the ridgepole of the barn and picked butternuts and cracked them on the chimney with a brick, and the whole town lined up and watched us and we made faces at 'em?"

"Oh, yes—yes—I remember!"

And suddenly she stood still, and put her mittened hands to her face and wept.

Joe was a very large boy and Althea was quite small. Joe's overcoat was an awkward affair, but ample and lined warmly with squirrel fur—with a long history of various half-frozen and discouraged little animals sheltered and warmed within it—rabbits, owls, kittens, chickens—for he kept a most marvelous barnful of unprofitable nondescripts at his mother's expense, being her only son, and she a widow. . . .

And now Althea had her cry out inside it. She stayed there until she was quite warm and had begun to laugh, a little scared and nervous. Joe was only a boy, but then—she would not have cared to have Paul know. There seemed a weary number of things Paul did not think right, and, good heavens! how the boy's heart was thumping under her ear! But all he said as she came out was, "You poor young one!"

After this they walked rapidly and talked fast. Only Joe said at the door, "I do wish you'd come to see Mother sometimes," and Althea said that perhaps she would.

The Adams house was dark. The Adamses had gone to the Baptist sociable across the river and might not be home for an hour yet. In Althea's room, though there was moonlight enough, moonlight was all that was to be had in the way of light and heat, Mrs. Adams having forgotten Althea's timid request for a warm room that evening; and the lamp, when Althea lit it, went out with a feeble sputter for lack of oil.

Althea sat down by her frosted window. But within the chill and the worry and fatigue there was an odd disturbing flutter, something the way a moth just out of its cocoon, weak and moist, vibrates its baby wings. . . .

Moreover, when Althea put her hands upon her cheeks they were hot. They had grown hot and red like that for Mr. Cooper at first—but not of late. . . . She found herself thinking riotously of all that old playtime with Joe. How was it that she had become so much older than Joe? What leap of time had made her a woman and engaged to be married while Joe still pattered at the high school and presumably still carved surreptitious initials on his desk. Was it still "A. M.?" she wondered, or some other girl who hadn't grown up as A. M. had done?

Through a portion of her window that was clear of frost the roof of the old house, glittering with ice, was visible. What was it Monday, then, that they were going to tear its heart out? Oh, then she wished that she might start for the tropical island to-morrow that she might not see.

**S**OMETHING made her heart give a great jarring leap. Was that—could it be a light in her mother's window? But the next second she saw that all the other windows of the village had caught the moon in the same ghostly way. So it was not anything human and warm, only ice and desolation such as Paul had talked about in his sermon.

How real the house looked! Yet soon it would begin to dissolve into the end of everything.

She put on the despoiled fur cape over her coat, took matches and a candle, and with the house key, which she had kept for a child's reason when all the rest of the house was lost to her, went out again upon the ice.

Like everything else in the world the keyhole was deep in ice and she must thaw it with her warm breath. At last, after a struggle that had almost warmed her, the sheathing of ice clattered down like hail and the door swung inward.

The hall was huge, still, and terribly cold. The emptiness, too, made it strange for a moment, but when she had tiptoed through to the dining-room she found the moonlight there, and all the room was crowded with ghosts crying: "Althea has come back! I told you she would!"

"I was your high chair," came a whisper out of the mottled shadow. "I stood at the corner of the table, or else back against the wall."

"You haven't forgotten me," crooned something sleepily—"your mother's rocking chair."

"I'm the sofa that stood between these windows. Daddy liked me best. Look, and you'll find the ashes from his pipe in cracks of the floor."

"Oh," said Althea, "you dear, dear things, good-by! You are nothing now and to-morrow you'll be less than nothing."

**S**HE threw kisses at them all, and lighting her candle turned to the stairs. The waving flame sent a confusion of shadows clustering about the stairhead as though people had been leaning over the rail watching her furtively, and now drew back before the light. Almost she had called them: "Daddy, Mother—Uncle Victor!"

In the upper hall the doors stood open at different angles as if the beloved shadows had retreated each to its own room to wait for her—and here again she waved kisses to each empty oblong, once the entrance to a living reality that had seemed deadless.

She pushed her own door wide, and there, black in the moonlight, crouched her old box stove. There too was the wood box, full as she had left it. Why, she could be warm! She could stay all night in the house if she liked. She laughed as she built her fire. And yet, when it was done, how dark it made the rest of the house!—that small red circle of fire-light in the stove door and the cheerful noise of the flames. Yet looking only at that and not at the bare walls, why, then she knew it was the loss and emptiness that were dreams, that the ghosts were real, at least as real as herself, for, above the noises of the fire she heard the sounds of them—Uncle Victor walking up and down the dining-room as he always did after tea, talking politics with Daddy, who lay on the sofa scratching the cat's ear and answering out of the side of his mouth away from his pipe. . . . and Mother had her mending basket by the red-covered dining table, and old Tilly was cleaning up in the kitchen. All this was so while she looked into the red eye of the stove, but at a glance over her shoulder away they went. . . . and she was alone again in an empty house.

Then she remembered the garret door—she had been afraid of all sorts of harmless things when she was little. Some places in particular had been full of formless terror. But the garret door had been the worst of all. Oddly enough, she could play in the garret itself if it was a sunny day so that you could see well into the corners; but once out of the garret she could not endure that the door should be left open. Even though she had just been safely playing there for an hour with never a goblin in sight, the door must be shut once she was down, or—there was no telling. She had had dreams about that door; of its opening slowly, oh, very slowly, and Something coming out—slowly—very slowly. But she never knew what. There had never been any shape to it at all; just danger and trouble—just fear stealing toward a little child from corners. "They tell you the world is happy and safe. They lie. Turn and look at Me." But she had never looked.

**S**HE laughed now to remember that phantom; then laughed again with a catching of the throat to find it scaring her as of old. She turned her head fearfully toward the door that led to the hall, wondering if the garret door were now shut—and if it were only the wind that sounded like a woman's skirts rustling through the hall.

To turn her mind from these absurdities she went to the closet for the old doll and reached back—far. Oh, yes,—there were the little morocco shoes, and, yes,—the wide blue eyes and the eternal smile. And, —yes—too, the dust of the bunch of wild roses that had been placed upon her breast at the time of her entombment.

Althea dragged her out and sat with her in the firelight, patting her clothes in order, arranging her dusty old wig. . . . Then she hid her face in the doll's skirts, weeping—and weeping. . . .

A stick broke and fell, sending up sparks. Althea opened the door wide to get the most of her fire while it lasted. All the wood was sunk to nothing more than strings of red beads in gray ashes. Her candle, too, was half gone. And so at last with her doll on her arm and holding the candle high in one hand she stepped into the hall. It stretched darkly to right and left—and—the garret door was open. Just as her heart leaped with the old fear of it a draft of the warmer air from behind her blew out the candle flame, and what—oh, what came toward her in the blackness—

She knew even as she screamed and fled from it that it was only the print of the extinguished candle-light upon her eye, only that, given shape by the dreary fancies of the day and by Paul's terrible words. It was silly to be frightened; yet, it was—oh, it was the face in the picture—the frightened face. And an arm was raised as if to threaten or warn, and the other—what did it hold—just as Althea was holding her doll!

Oh—Paul had not told her that! Poor thing, oh, poor thing! Was it so that she had died out there among the palms?

Then Althea tripped at the stairhead and fell. . . .

They would probably have found her there in the morning, gone to her ghosts, had not Mrs. Mack sent Joe to see why there was a light in the old Martin house. And so he came, whistling, over the ice, with a revolver and a lantern, found the unlocked door, and then stealing with belated caution flung a sudden pool of light about Althea's face, looking as if she slept, while the doll, hugged to her cheek, smiled unwiningly.

**I**N THE interval of carrying her back to his mother, thinking her dead, that change took place in Joe which made his mother know when she saw his face that, whereas she had sent forth a boy, a man with the dignity of a man's sorrow upon him had come back to her. . . .

Paul arrived in the dark of the six o'clock streets.

"He ought to be here—for several reasons," Mrs. Mack had said, thrusting her son once more into the night; and Joe, unwillingly remembering the missionary's lameness, waited to give him an arm over the ice.

Mrs. Mack came down with a swift rustle when Joe laid his hand upon the door, her fingers on her lips. The doctor was in the hall getting into his arctic and adjusting his ear caps. "I'll be back in a couple of hours," he said. "Case, down the Hollow; but she'll be all right now, for a while, I think."

Joe went outdoors again and stood with his back to a tree, staring up at the lighted window, now beginning to pale in the feeble dawnlight, and Mrs. Mack took the missionary into her library.

There were books on all sides of the room from floor to ceiling, and a green-shaded reading lamp drew a circle of light upon papers lying in studiosa disarray upon a large flat-topped table. Too many books and scholarship beyond his own aroused suspicions in the missionary's straightforward mind.

**M**RS. MACK leaned back wearily, her hands palm upward in her lap, like one who has labored to the utmost and now must resign the work's drawn and shut sharply between his teeth, stared hard at the fire, his eyes wide and miserable. Mrs. Mack's kind voice was tense with exasperation.

"She must have gone there after an old doll, we think. They are to begin tearing down the house to-morrow, you know. At least she had one in her arms when Joe found her, and instead of dropping it and trying to save herself when she fell she must have saved it exactly as if it had been a baby. The wretched creature's head wasn't even cracked," said Mrs. Mack, brushing away swift tears.

"So much of a child as that!" said Paul, with pity and wonder. "I had thought her far beyond her years."

"So much of a woman!" cried Mrs. Mack. "Oh,—what do men know! What do they know! Are you going to let her take her doll with her, may I ask,—her voice rose angrily—"when you take her to that bloodthirsty island of yours? Provided, of course, the Lord decides to let her stay in this world at all." "Should I deny her a doll, or any other innocent thing she fancied?" protested Paul with a shaken voice: "I came to this village the wretchedest man in the world, my faith in God and man well-nigh destroyed; and then, evening after evening, those wonderful eyes were upon me—the face so lovely—exalted—young, until I said 'God's messenger, surely,' and believed again—"

"Of course," said Mrs. Mack. "She had so little to interest her. Oh, I should have looked after her. Girls like that. . . . and did you tell her the manner of your first wife's death?"

The sharp question drove into Paul's side like another spear thrust. He stumbled to his feet, putting out a hand against her cruelty.

"The Lord gave," he gasped, "and the Lord hath taken away. . . . Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Amen, Brother," said Mrs. Mack soberly. "Had the Lord not bereaved me also I should have had no right to speak to you so. But, tell me, would the Lord so surely have taken away if your wife had been in one of the countries we vaingloriously call Christian, with an ordinarily competent physician within call?"

"Do you think," he groaned, "I haven't wrestled night after night with that awful question? It was that which had nearly robbed me of my faith."

**"Y**ES," she answered drily, "faith and facts are apt to make rather restless bedfellows. But were these angels not able to convince you between them that your island was no place to take another woman?"

"She—loved me—" said Paul. "And surely my faith declares we are as much in God's hands upon my island as here."

"Possibly," said Mrs. Mack. "Yet I had supposed from your description that the business of taking your island out of the hands of the devil was hardly, as yet, complete—" She rose impatiently to pace up and down, stopping now and then to touch the many papers and books that lay upon the great flat-topped desk.

"You spoke of tortured men. If men had the least idea what it is that women undergo at the gates of life—let them torture each other! Perhaps they will in that way learn. And to endure it in such a place as that—and—to lose the battle! And then you calmly invite another woman out there to the same fate! Lord's will! If I needed a church I think I would make friends with one that does not put members upon the firing line. If the world is to get forward, Brother, as you seem honestly to desire, let it avail itself of whatever of protection the Lord's mercy has provided for women and children."

She was interrupted by a cry that sent them both running up the stairs.

"Joe!" cried Althea piercingly. "Oh, Joe! Joe! Don't let them come!"

"For whom is she calling?" asked Paul, surprised, but too fine for jealousy.

"For my son," answered Mrs. Mack, her eyes blazing through tears at him as she soothed the broken little body. "She is on your island—a world away from every white face but yours—and she is calling for my son."

Then, as the missionary still stood dazedly looking at them, "You call to youth, Brother; not to us. Do I stand between them? I step aside from his path. Do you the same from hers. It may be that God will accompany us on the rest of our journey. If not, we must make it alone."

So Paul went out and found Joe leaning against his tree and staring at the window.

"She's calling you," he said.

Joe tore in with silent ferocity. Yet afterward he seemed to remember that the Reverend Paul had bared his head, there in the zero weather, and was looking straight into the sunrise, smiling in a grand way, while his sandy hair shone like the golden blaze they put around angels' heads in pictures.